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BRIEFINGS, JANUARY 2009

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¶1. (U) Summary: This is the South African Environment, Science and Technology Monthly Briefings Newsletter, January 2009, Volume 4, Number 1, prepared by the U.S. Embassy Pretoria, South Africa.

Topics of the newsletter:

- NATIONAL SPACE AGENCY BILL PASSED INTO LAW
- SOUTH AFRICA CELEBRATES INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF ASTRONOMY 2009
- DWAF ACTS TO PREVENT WATER SUPPLY SHORTAGES
- CAPE TOWN MAKES PROGRESS IN RECYCLING
- GOVERNMENT DENIES LAND RIGHTS TO KRUGER COMMUNITIES
- SOUTH AFRICA UNLIKELY TO REACH GHG EMISSION TARGETS
- UNILEVER COMPANY ABANDONS THE HOODIA PLANT INITIATIVE
- RHINO POACHING SYNDICATE NABBED
- LOCAL COUNCIL DISPUTES NUMBER OF DEAD FISH FOUND IN RIVER
- KRUGER NATIONAL PARK RIVERS TEST POSITIVE FOR CHOLERA
- SHARK SPOTTING A HIT WITH TOURISTS
- CAPE WHALES FACE NEW THREAT
- GERMAN GOVERNMENT SUSPENDS SOUTHERN OCEAN EXPERIMENT
- NEW RADARS WILL HELP PREDICT STORM DANGERS
- MONTHLY FACTOID

National Space Agency Bill Passed into Law

¶2. (U) South African President Kgalema Motlanthe signed a law establishing the South African National Space Agency (NSA), which will regulate South African space-related activities. Department of Science and Technology Minister Mosebudi Mangena emphasized that space activity plays a significant role in modern day economies, noting that satellite images are used for minerals prospecting, city planning, precision farming, and weather predictions. Mangena said South Africa was already spending over R600 million (\$60 million) per year on space-related operations. The date for formal establishment of the NSA has not been specified; media reports speculate it would be before the end of the year. South Africa operates two civilian satellites, the SunSat, which is already in orbit, and the Sumbandilasat, which is yet to be launched. Sumbandilasat is expected to be launched in March.

South Africa Celebrates International
Year of Astronomy 2009

13. (U) Minister of Science and Technology Mosebudi Mangena launched the International Year of Astronomy (IYA) in January 2009. IYA, a year-long celebration of astronomical studies and activities, coincides with the 400th anniversary of Galileo's first recorded astronomical observation, and Johannes Kepler's first publication of the fundamental laws of planetary motions in "The Astronomic Nova" in 1609. "South Africa's involvement in classical western astronomy formally started in 1685, 76 years after Galileo made the first telescopic observation," remarked Mangena, when a temporary observatory was established in Cape Town. Observatories, planetariums, and science centers countrywide would have astronomy activities for young students as part of the year-long celebration. Cape Town Astronomical Observatory plans to assist African countries which did not have observatories or university astronomy departments.

DWAF Acts to Prevent Water Supply Shortages

14. (U) Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry (DWAF) Lindiwe Hendricks announced in January the development of the R7.3 billion (\$730 million) Lesotho Highlands Water Project, a project that will augment the Vaal River System. The Vaal River System is one of the most important water resources of South Africa and supplies sixty percent of the country's economy and forty percent of the population, including the entire province of Gauteng. Widespread media reports in 2008 raised concerns regarding water shortages in Gauteng by 2013. Farmers, industries, municipalities and mines are

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all accused of water theft and pollution. Media reports indicate that about 180 million cubic meters of water is lost to theft from farmers per year. The Minister said DWAF was taking action to deal with the water shortage, and had issued directives to the farmers to stop water theft. Eighty cases have been brought to court. Hendricks also said that DWAF has set aside R550 million (\$50.5 million) to work with municipalities to improve sewage water treatment plants along the Vaal River.

Cape Town Makes Progress in Waste Recycling

15. (U) Cape Town Solid Waste Department Head of Waste Minimization Alison Davidson announced the success of a major recycling program. The city has conducted numerous waste recycling pilot programs in the past few years; most were not successful. The new project has drop off points for glass, metal, paper and garden waste at strategic points of the city. Davidson said companies are now buying back recyclable materials and have established their own strategic collection points to maximize collection efficiency. The program targets high density areas and encourages residents and property managers to set up recycling programs. The number of garbage bins carrying mixed waste in the areas has decreased under the program. Cape Town plans to measure its success rate by the volumes of cubic meter space at the landfill site.

Government Denies Land Rights to
Kruger Park Communities

16. (U) The South African government decided not to restore land rights to claimant communities in the world-famous Kruger National Park (KNP) because the park is considered to be an international and national asset. This action will settle long-standing land claims by communities in the area. The Directors General of the Departments of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) and Land

Affairs (DAL) told local communities that the government will provide them with equitable redress, which could include awarding alternative land and/or financial compensation. Other benefits could include guaranteed access to ancestral/traditional sites and graves on agreed-upon calendar dates; preferential procurement; jobs and business opportunities; youth development; acknowledgement of local history in selecting names for facilities; and establishment of a visitor's levy and a Community Trust Fund. Although some community leaders welcomed these proposals, others were unhappy about the loss of title to the land. DEAT and DLA and the South African National Parks (SANParks) will continue to engage the claimant communities in discussions to try and resolve outstanding disagreements.

South Africa Unlikely to Reach
GHG Emission Reduction Target

¶17. (U) Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) Air Quality Management and Climate Change Chief Peter Lukey emphasized that South Africa will not reach its greenhouse gas (GHG) emission targets unless South Africans change their attitudes towards energy use. He cautioned that new technologies would be effective to lower carbon emissions only if coupled with people's change in energy usage. Lukey provided details about South Africa's Long Term Mitigation Scenario (LTMS), a multi-stakeholder research process QMitigation Scenario (LTMS), a multi-stakeholder research process which examines GHG emission reduction scenarios for South Africa. The LTMS process documents all currently available interventions such as bio-fuels, renewable energies, solar power, and fuel efficiency models. Continuing at current economic growth rates without energy use changes would increase the country's carbon emissions fourfold by 2050. Lukey noted that the government request for a 15 percent reduction in energy use had been met with only a three percent reduction. He also commented that the government's poor response to recent power shortages indicated a lack of commitment to be more energy efficient.

Unilever Company Abandons the
Hoodia Plant Initiative

¶18. (U) Unilever has abandoned plans to develop weight-loss products based on South Africa's indigenous Hoodia Gordonii plant, dashing the local San community's hopes that it would profit from the succulent. Unilever had invested over \$29 million in research on the plant over four years, in partnership with British company

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Phytopharm and South Africa's Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR). Unilever spokesperson Trevor Gorin said that although hoodia had been traditionally used by San and Khoi hunters to suppress hunger and thirst during extended hunting expeditions, it might not be safe or effective for dieters. He noted that hoodia has potentially dangerous side effects, including increased blood pressure. Unilever researchers also found that hoodia had little or no impact upon the calorie consumption of participants. Unilever has returned the development rights to Phytopharm. Phytopharm's Functional Foods Chief Simon MacWilliam is adamant that hoodia might still have potential as a commercial weight-management aide, and is seeking new partners to continue with the development and marketing of hoodia.

Local Council Disputes Number of Dead
Fish Found in River

¶19. (U) Raw sewage seeping from malfunctioning Emfuleni Municipality sewage works began flowing into the Vaal River in November. Save the Vaal Environment (SAVE) Chairperson Lotter Wepener said twenty tons of rotting dead fish had been removed from the river since the beginning of January. Emfuleni Acting Chief Director of Water and Sanitation Cecil Schreuder disputed that amount and said the

municipality would do its own tests. Wepener believes that raw sewage continues to run into the Riet, Loch and Vaal rivers. Rand Water has assured Johannesburg residents that their drinking water remains safe as it is sourced from the Vaal Dam. There are also concerns that water at the Sasol One Unit in Sasolburg might contain low-level traces of e-coli.

Rhino Poaching Syndicate Nabbed

¶10. (U) Eleven people alleged to be part of a rhino poaching syndicate have been arrested following a joint operation by SANParks, the South African Police Service (SAPS), the Mpumalanga, Limpopo, and NorthWest provincial organized crime units, and the Gauteng Province Task Team. Five Mozambicans, three Chinese based in South Africa, and two South Africans were arrested for poaching. The sporadic slaughter of rhinos in Mpumalanga, Limpopo and Northwest prompted the provincial crime units to combine their efforts.

Kruger National Park Rivers Test
Positive for Cholera

¶11. (U) SANParks Spokesman Raymond Travers reports that few Kruger Park rivers have tested positive for cholera. He added that park visitors and workers need not worry about contracting cholera in the park because the park has adequate sanitation facilities. The park straddles the provinces of Mpumalanga and Limpopo, which have treated the highest percentage of the 3,000 f people with the disease in the country. Tests were being conducted on all rivers in the park to monitor the situation. Travers added, "There is no need for visitors to worry or bring bottled water, the park's tap water is safe to drink." He also noted that the animals are not affected by the contamination.

Shark Spotting a Hit with Tourists

¶12. (U) Cape Town shark spotters are becoming a tourist attraction in addition to keeping the beaches safe for swimmers. Cape Town Qin addition to keeping the beaches safe for swimmers. Cape Town Head of Environmental Policy and Strategy Gregg Oeofse says the shark-spotting program is the only one of its kind in the world. The program has prevented shark attacks by providing nearly 450 early warnings in the past four years. The program was begun in 2004 after a shark bit off a swimmer's leg, and the number of spotters was increased a few months later when a great white shark killed a Fish Hoek beach swimmer. There have been no shark attacks since 2004 at any beaches where shark spotters have been on duty. Shark spotter Eric Myeko says he is a celebrity now, noting "people go to our website and see our photographs. When they arrive, some ask for us by name." In peak season, there are spotters at Clovelly Corner, Glencairn, St. James, Fish Hoek, Muizenberg, Noordhoek, Strand Pavilion, Blue Water, Mnandi and Monwabisi beaches.

Cape Whales Face New Threat

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¶13. (U) Western Cape environmentalists have objected to PetroSA plans for a new liquid gas mooring facility in a known whale-breeding site near Mossel Bay. Mossel Bay, a favorite stopping point for migrating whales, is one of the Cape's last pristine marine areas. Rescue Vleesbai Chair Mareo Bekker said "PetroSA's facility is ill-conceived, short-sighted and environmentally damaging." Coastal ecologist Allan Heydorn said noise and pollution from the plant will affect whales and dolphins, and possibly subject them to entanglement in underwater cables. He added that a fire or explosion would have "catastrophic long-term consequences." He noted that "either slow or insidious pollution and littering or a catastrophic event will place the entire

inter-and sub-tidal ecosystem and near shore marine food webs at risk."

¶14. (U) PetroSA spokesman Thabo Msabo said the project would bring in R428 million (\$43.2 million) annually and insure 2,000 jobs. He noted that that gas reserves off Mossel Bay are dwindling and that to prevent plant closures, PetroSA must bring in additional supplies. Most of the gas will be used to power Eskom's Gourikwa power station which was expanded in 2008. Critics complain that PetroSA has bypassed the Environmental Impact Assessment process and has already entered into contracts for the supply of gas and to construct the plant.

German Government Suspends Southern Ocean Experiment

¶15. (U) The German government suspended all operations involving Lohafex, an Indo-German iron fertilization experiment scheduled to be conducted in the Southern Ocean. The German icebreaker Polarstern left Cape Town in early January with forty-eight scientists who had planned to fertilize an ocean patch measuring 300 square kilometers with twenty tons of dissolved iron sulphate to encourage algae bloom on the Scotia Sea near Antarctica. Their theory was that the bloom would absorb carbon dioxide and reduce greenhouse gases. CSIR Head of Ocean System and Climate Group Dr. Pedro Monterio said South Africa should continue to play a major role in ocean fertilization despite the suspension of this project. Monterio believes that these projects "remain essential" to understanding the risks involved. He commented that, "Even though Polarstern is the largest experiment, it is still insignificantly small in terms of the carbon fluxes in the Southern Ocean."

¶16. (U) Greenpeace Senior Scientist Dr. David Santillo said, "We're deeply concerned about this project because we don't feel that attempts to manipulate the ocean ecosystem on a massive scale will constitute a sustainable approach to mitigating climate change. It would actually make matters worse." Environmental groups noted that the expedition was contrary to the Convention on Biodiversity which restricts experiments to small scale projects in coastal waters. Santillo notes that this project "is neither small scale nor in coastal waters." He added that the project could 'result in large-scale and long-term adverse impacts on ocean ecosystems - impacts which may be even harder to mitigate against.'

New Radars Will Help Predict Storm Dangers

¶17. (U) The South Africa Weather Service (SAWS) announced plans to install advanced equipment to predict thunderstorms and tornados across South Africa over the next three years. Outdated equipment will be replaced with new Doppler radars, the type used in the U.S. Chief Forecaster Kevin Rae said SAWS plans to "completely redo radar systems across the country." There will be staggered installation of Doppler radars in Joburg, Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and Durban. New Radar Network Project Manager Georgie George said that radars could determine how much water clouds contain and the direction they are moving which is important in pinpointing the location of tornados.

The major challenge is how to get the information to people in time, especially in the rural areas. George said there would be about a 30-minute warning time before a tornado would strike. Rae added that "one pilot project is working with a short-term insurer to relay short messages in specific areas where severe weather is predicted." He said SAWS is also looking at "improved formal relationships" with cell phone providers to send messages to people in affected areas. He added, "It is a matter of willpower to get these things off the ground; the commercial bottom line has to be overlooked to get warnings out for the good of the public."

Monthly Factoid

¶18. (U) The Republic of South Africa takes up an area of 1,221,037 square kilometers - equal to the combined land mass of Germany,

Italy and France. The coastline stretches for some 2,954 kilometers, with many beautiful beaches and wonderful sea views.

La Lime